PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
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DECCAN BIRDERS EVENTS

In light of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic, all Deccan Birders Field Trips and Indoor Meetings are on hold until further notice. Details of upcoming activities will be communicated once the situation improves.

BLAST FROM THE PAST
Report: Lonar Crater, October 2012 & 2019

Text: N Shiva Kumar (with inputs from MS Kulkarni)
Photos: N Shiva Kumar (unless specified otherwise)

Lonar Lake Wildlife Sanctuary on its revival path

It was October 19, 2012, and I had just finished my office tour to Bombay and landed in Aurangabad on my way back to Delhi. This was my second visit to the sleepy town of Aurangabad, famous as the tourist hub in Maharashtra state. Situated 370km from Bombay, Aurangabad is surrounded by historical monuments, including the Ajanta and Ellora Caves; both are World Heritage Sites. So is the 17th-century marble Bibi-ka-Maqbara, styled on the Taj Mahal. The medieval Daulatabad Fort and nearby Museum, dedicated to the Maratha king Shivaji are other attractions. As I had seen all of them before, my visit was focused on getting a glimpse of the unique Lonar Crater and quenching my long-pending curiosity. Off the beaten track and not on regular tourist circuit, even the tourist office in Aurangabad was not forthcoming with useful information on Lonar.

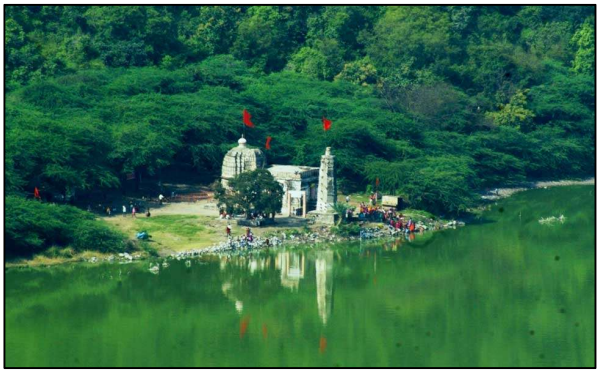
I hired a cab for a full day trip, and even the driver was not aware of Lonar Crater, so we made enquires beforehand. The next day, October 20, 2012, we hit the road at 4:00AM to escape the heat of the day. The road was an unpaved mud motorway, good to go, but dimpled and dusty. The road-ride of 170km was nevertheless pleasant due to the moist morning aroma of the earth wafting through the vehicle windows. Most of the drive was bland as sun-up was many minutes away, and the horizon was still warming up with its predawn glow. Suddenly, across the road, we saw an animal lying on the road with fresh red blood oozing from its mouth. It was a Jackal, a healthy specimen with no physical body injuries, probably hit on the head, but an unfortunate victim of road kill, which seem to have happened in the wee hours. The rest of the journey was spent in muted mood.

On reaching the sleepy village of Lonar after nearly four hours, I stopped to have some tea to uplift my spirits, and enquired about the crater to begin my exploration. The Lonar Lake is an exceptional 'bowl of biodiversity' nearly 3km across from rim to rim, ensconced inside the Lonar Wildlife Sanctuary. It is land-locked with extraordinary water qualities, has no inlets or outlets, nor does the water seep into the ground. The only escape is by evaporation, as the region experiences temperatures of up to 47°C. The Crater Lake is fed by small underground streams that are now drying up due to human folly. However, since ancient time, every summer the lake would go mostly dry and the salt cakes that were formed at the lake bottom would be harvested and sold as therapeutic soaps. History tells us that that even Emperor Akbar was fond of these soap bars, and in the mid-1990s there was a mini-factory within the crater harvesting the salt cakes.

The remarkable shape, size and samples of celestial leftovers have rendered exceptionality to this crater. The extraordinary traits have attracted steady attention of geologists, ecologists and astronomers from across the globe, though only in a trickle. It has been the subject of several sample scientific studies on various aspects of crater ecosystem, yet it is seemingly unknown to the general public. Strangely, NASA seems to have more information about our Lonar Crater than we have in India.

Incredibly old at 50,000 years, the Lonar Crater is the youngest and best preserved 'impact crater' formed in basalt rock and is the only one of its kind on earth. Formed by a blazing ball of fire that weighed over one million tons in deadweight, it was a meteorite travelling at an awesome speed of 80,000 kilometres per hour. It is believed to have pierced our blue planet and hit the earth with such fire, force and fury that it dug a deep depression in the rock-solid Deccan plateau. It apparently crashed, exploded, erupted and spewed molten rock, creating a magnificent crest on the rim covering a 2KM diameter. Even though it was a mere chip off the moon, the hypervelocity impact of the 380,000 kilometre journey from the moon to the earth, has left a dent 200 meters deep.

India's vast territory has various remote terrains, but none as extraordinary as the Lonar Crater, which forms a lake that lies close to the world famous Ajanta and Ellora caves, yet it is in obscurity. It is evident that urbanization at the neighbouring Lonar village coupled with ever-increasing pilgrim population has led to an indiscriminate invasion of human activities.



Live temple on lake shore polluted by trash

When we visited in 2012, we could see that the Lonar Crater and Lake was visibly violated by human presence, and this created a constant threat to the ecosystem and its remarkable biodiversity. The lake also happens to be a captive water-body; hence the concentration of chemicals has been on the rise and has caused irreversible pollution.

Accompanied by a local man who claimed to be a guide, we made our way down into the crater as there was no clear-cut path. We just followed the worn tracks made by pilgrims, the hoof prints of cattle and the trail of discarded of water bottles and *paan masala* sachets and other trash. The going was slow as the rudimentary path was pebble-strewn, inclined and zigzag. There are quite a few such winding paths to go down into the crater but we chose the one with lesser gradient and the crater walls less high. As we walked down the variety of shrub and bush growth gave way to tall trees and plenty of shade to walk. The hum of the insects and the birds chirping were enchanting. With the sun somewhere up there, I could feel the heat even though it was dim and damp on the forest floor.

Langur trying to bite open a plastic bottle

We came across a few scattered temples with intricate carvings but all in ruins. Further up the jungle path the flat lake was visible. Here we reached another set of temples on the edge of the lake where pilgrims were busy being pious. I noticed a hovering Kestrel. For the birder, there was much to see: a Red-wattled Lapwing creating a ruckus, fleeting glimpses of a Golden Oriole, a Green Bee-eater flitting around. There were also some squirrels screeching, and a few Langurs lingering around the temple, hoping to be offered food by the devotees. The blaring sounds of rustic devotional songs killed the silence.

After three hours of walking around the lake and inside the crater, with plenty of pictures and some bird watching, I was hot and thirsty. While the initial anticipation of going down was interesting, the exploring, and the prospect of climbing up was not enticing, as it was steep and sultry with the sun blazing down with intensity. I was cursing my friend MS Kulkarni, who was supposed to accompany me to Lonar but did not turn up on time, as he had to catch multiple buses from Hyderabad to reach Aurangabad. On my return from Lonar, after spending nearly nine hours in the open and on the move, I was dog-tired and retired early to bed.

Greater Flamingo (adult & juvenile) at Jayakwadi Bird Sanctuary near Aurangabad

However, the next day, October 21, 2012, I met Kulkarni at Aurangabad and went bird watching at the Jayakwadi Bird Sanctuary on the Godavari River near Aurangabad. We sighted Flamingos, Brahminy (or Ruddy) Shelducks, some Pochards, Common Teals, Northern Pintails, Eurasian Wigeons, Northern Shovelers, Glossy Ibis, etc. We promised ourselves that we would return again sometime to spend at least two/three days at Lonar for a full survey of the area.

That second journey to Lonar Lake Sanctuary finally materialized after seven years, on October 10, 2019, when we reassembled in Aurangabad and spent two days at Lonar on October 11-12, 2019. This time we were better prepared, as we had sought the help of Dr S Kurhade, Professor of Zoology from Ahmednagar, who is also one of the Wildlife Wardens of Maharashtra. He not only made arrangements to stay at the Forest Guest House right next to the rim of the crater, but also took us in his vehicle from Aurangabad to Lonar and introduced us to some wonderful people of Lonar village.

On arrival, I was pleasantly surprised to note that practically a full facelift had been given to the 'geological gem' in Maharashtra. The maddening crowds stampeding into the Lonar Lake had disappeared, a bold step was taken to decommission the ancient temples and stop all religious activities. The entire Sanctuary was fenced, plenty of tree plantation was noticeable, educative sign boards were evident and there was a visible change in the lush vegetation all-round. A very pleasant surprise!

Walls of the Lonar Crater with flourishing greenery

We met Arun Mapari, a web designer, who had worked for 20 years in Aurangabad. One day in 2015, he simply gave up the ordeal of city life and decided to settle in his home town Lonar and started a restaurant. Similarly, Sachin Kapure, a software consultant, quit urban life in Pune to set up a boutique hotel in Lonar. Meanwhile, Santosh and Vilas, known as the Jadhav brothers, employed with the State Government and active in social work, joined Arun and Sachin, to stimulate the location. Collectively they have inspired the inhabitants of sleepy Lonar to lead by example instead of knocking on the door of the authorities.

'One great hour for Lonar' T-shirts distributed to volunteers

The four have started a movement of sorts, calling it *'Mi Lonarkar'*, beseeching the local population not to neglect the site that is known worldwide. They launched a local campaign, 'One great hour for Lonar', that entailed cleaning up the crater and its surrounding areas. It was a low-key costless campaign, started simply by sending out SMS and WhatsApp messages; whoever wished to, could join voluntarily.

The Lonar population is about 25,000, far from the madding crowds of the nearby cities. Very few visitors come by, and those who do are mostly day tourists who take a dip in the natural spring around which an intact ancient temple survives. Farmers from far and near also visit to buy and sell their produce in the local markets. The tiny hamlet, nevertheless, ranks as one of the topmost 'geological gems' in the world as the Lonar Crater here is considered distinctive.

Trekking routes and nature walks had been plotted out to the bottom of the crater. The idea was, 'Walk, and pick up the trash accumulated over the years, while communing with the ecology in the crater'. World Environment Day on June 5, 2017, was a landmark one, as people voluntarily participated for an hour and, thereafter, once a week, particularly on holidays, in operation clean-up. What started with four people went on to become 40-strong in four months, swelling up to 400-strong in four years. Importantly, over the years, tons of trash was removed and it was indeed a stupendous achievement for a self-help group in a remote village.

Kulkarni, Vilas (with backpack) & Sachin during the walk

Abundant wild Custard Apples in the forest

On our first day, after the know-each-other-meeting, we went on a walk along the rim of the crater until sunset and found it very fascinating. The next day we went down into the crater, exploring much of the vegetation and bird life, with Sachin and Vilas as guardians. I was particularly pleased with the vast improvement, with no pilgrims and unruly tourists having picnics inside the crater.

Frothy spittle mass produced by Spittlebugs

The jungle was luxurious and filled with the calls of birds, particularly peacocks making merry with their guttural sounds. Koels peeped from the tree tops and bright Orioles loitered amongst the leafy branches, as smaller birds moved in the bushes, and butterflies with their lazy flight alighted at sunny spots. Dead trunks had plenty of mushrooms sprouting, and the ground was littered with large beetles, colourful bugs and plenty of fat millipedes and centipedes.

Millipedes curled up on the forest floor

Common Hoopoe foraging inside the crater

As we were busy looking up into the canopy searching for birds, a large six-foot snake slithered across our path, and we nearly stepped on it. Recovering from the shock of finding a snake, I could only shoot some photos of the disappearing tail into the bushes, as the healthy Rat Snake slithered away.

Up close at the lake waters, there were plenty of large 'soap bubbles' floating on the waters – maybe methane and ethane emanating from the lake bottom. The active temple I saw seven years ago was silent, locked up, now under the ASI, but the monkeys hung around relaxing near the premises. We grouped for souvenir selfie poses, some photo shoots at the floor's centre and, after a walk around the lake, got ready for the hike back up to the rim.

Once the most busy temple, now used only to collect mineral water from the natural spring

Sprouting Fig Tree leaves seeking sunlight filtering through the canopy

The temperature was still blazingly hot, and we were tired, but imbibing plenty of water kept us going. It was amazing to stand in the middle of the crater and look all around at the walls towering on all sides. I shot a couple of panoramas and wide-angle pictures. With the blue sky above and the crater bottom terrain all around, you certainly got a taste of the thinking of what it would be like to be standing in the middle of a small crater on the Moon.

Common Jezebel (Photo: Dr Sudhakar Kurhade)

Red Pierrot (Photo: Dr Sudhakar Kurhade)

Dr. Kurhade, who has visited Lonar on many earlier occasions, says, "The unique Lonar Lake with alkaline and saline waters was being polluted over the years by waste waters discharged and dumped from the nearby village. Even though the environmental area of the crater has been declared a Wildlife Sanctuary, it needs enhanced protection. Plantation by the forest department has given it a green look at least on the periphery of the water and slopes of the crater. The principal vegetation of the area is of a dry deciduous type, mainly of Acacia trees, thorny bushes and different types of grasses. Teak, Neem, Acacia species and Babul are the other trees of common occurrence. Earlier there was a patch of about 22 hectares of land under cultivation within the crater and thankfully now it has been removed. The crater forest attracts a good number of bat species due to several fruit-bearing plants in the area. Roosts of insectivorous bats are common in the abandoned temples inside the Sanctuary. More than 50 species of butterflies are found in the area: Tailed Jay, Common Mormon, Lime Butterfly, Common Rose, Grass Yellow, Common Jezebel, Common Pierrot, Zebra Blue etc, to name a few. The notable insects are Painted Grasshopper, Praying Mantis, different types of Beetles, Termites, Rock Bees, Bumblebees, various species of Wasps etc. Sometimes Lantern Flies are also seen and plenty of Dragonflies are always hovering over the lake waters as the water volume increases during the seasonal monsoons."

Painted Grasshopper
(Photo: Dr Sudhakar Kurhade)

Oriental Garden Lizard

Lonar Crater was first noticed 190 years ago by British explorer, AJ Alexander, who went investigating the region. He found ancient temples in a dilapidated condition and strange ecology in a cavernous basin. It was vastly different from the surrounding flat landscape even though it was discovered 57 years before the Ajanta Caves. Strangely, both the Lonar Crater and the Ajanta Caves were chance discoveries by British explorers. Even more bizarre is 'Lonar', the name of the nearby village that is akin to the English word 'lunar', as if early Indians had the requisite knowledge that the crater was created by moon rock. It was initially thought to be a deep-throated volcanic formation, which was later refuted by scientists who concluded that it was moulded by a piece of flying moon rock or most probably a vagabond meteorite. Maskelynite, a kind of naturally occurring glass only formed by extremely high-velocity impact, has been found in the crater to prove that it was indeed a heavenly body that crashed here.

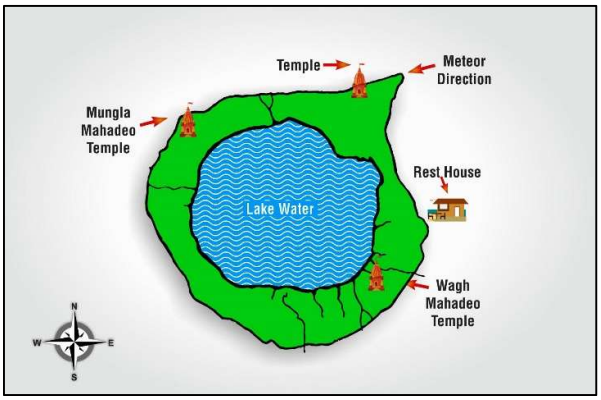
Sudhakar Bugdane with a specimen from his collection

Sudhakar Bugdane, a retired school principal, who was the first to publish an informative booklet on the Lonar Crater, rues the degradation of the environment around the crater. "It is evident that urbanization, coupled with ever increasing population, has led to an indiscriminate invasion of human activities in the Lonar Lake area, and has created a constant threat to the ecosystem and its remarkable biodiversity," he says.

Saving the Lonar Crater, which started as a hobby 40 years ago, has become a mission for the 74-year-old Bugdane. He regularly lectures about it and encourages the youth to research and celebrate the rare cosmic collision with earth. Kulkarni and I went to his house one evening, and he told us the entire story with fascination and enthusiasm akin to a youngster. He showed us the various special stones he had collected when he was young and also displayed its unique properties of floating on water and their curious magnetic properties with a hand-held compass.

Arun and Sachin explain that Bugdane was the first man to have started the battle for active conservation of the Lonar Crater many years ago. “We saw his aggressive approach for the cause of the crater, engaging doggedly with various departments. Despite many failures, he brought Lonar into the limelight. We decided to further the cause, but with a different stance and gathered similar-minded people to make it a movement. Without approaching the authorities, we started in a small way and spearheaded easy methods of implementing, like weekly trash collection etc. Steadily, various local and State departments began to understand our point of view without going to court for solutions.”

Today, after five years of constant team work, the ‘One great hour for Lonar’ initiative has been able to put up a fencing around the crater rim, stop religious processions within the crater, stop cutting of trees and the drainage of municipal waste into the lake. Regular patrolling is on to protect the crater. Even the Archaeology Department is repairing the cluster of heritage temples in the vicinity, many of which are over 1,000 years old. The Forest Department has declared it as the Lonar Wildlife Sanctuary and is reaping the harvest of practical conservation methods, as native flora and fauna is thriving and, surprisingly, a family of Leopards has made it their home. A bird-watching festival was also conducted recently and recorded over 150 species of birds. “Our team has gained the confidence and involvement of not only the citizens but also politicians and bureaucrats, while scientists were always backing our effort”, says Arun.



Map of the Lonar Crater area

Robber Fly

The complete list of birds seen is given below:

Sl. No.	Common Name	Sl. No.	Common Name	Sl. No.	Common Name
1	Little Grebe	21	Northern Shoveler	41	Purple Swamphen
2	Little Cormorant	22	Northern Pintail	42	Common Moorhen
3	Little Egret	23	Garganey	43	Common Coot
4	Grey Heron	24	Common Teal	44	Little Ringed Plover
5	Large Egret	25	Red-crested Pochard	45	Kentish Plover
6	Intermediate Egret	26	Common Pochard	46	Yellow-wattled Lapwing
7	Cattle Egret	27	Tufted Duck	47	Red-wattled Lapwing
8	Indian Pond Heron	28	Oriental Honey Buzzard	48	Pin-tailed Snipe
9	Black-crowned Night Heron	29	Black-shouldered Kite	49	Common Redshank
10	Asian Openbill	30	Black Kite	50	Marsh Sandpiper
11	Woolly-necked Stork	31	Western Marsh Harrier	51	Green Sandpiper
12	Black-headed Ibis	32	Shikra	52	Wood Sandpiper
13	Eurasian Spoonbill	33	White-eyed Buzzard	53	Common Sandpiper
14	Lesser Whistling-duck	34	Common Kestrel	54	Little Stint
15	Ruddy Shelduck	35	Grey Francolin	55	Black-winged Stilt
16	Knob-billed Duck	36	Jungle Bush Quail	56	River Tern
17	Cotton Pygmy-goose	37	Rock Bush Quail	57	Blue Rock Pigeon
18	Eurasian Wigeon	38	Grey Junglefowl	58	Oriental Turtle Dove
19	Mallard	39	Indian Peafowl	59	Laughing Dove
20	Spot-billed Duck	40	White-breasted Waterhen	60	Spotted Dove

Sl. No.	Common Name	Sl. No.	Common Name	Sl. No.	Common Name
61	Eurasian Collared Dove	94	Indian Skylark	127	Blyth's Reed Warbler
62	Emerald Dove	95	Dusky Crag Martin	128	Great Indian Reed Warbler
63	Pompadour Green Pigeon	96	Barn Swallow	129	Common Tailorbird
64	Yellow-footed Green Pigeon	97	Wire-tailed Swallow	130	Greenish Leaf Warbler
65	Alexandrine Parakeet	98	Red-rumped Swallow	131	Western Crowned Warbler
66	Rose-ringed Parakeet	99	White Wagtail	132	Lesser Whitethroat
67	Plum-headed Parakeet	100	White-browed Wagtail	133	Orphean Warbler
68	Jacobin (Pied Crested) Cuckoo	101	Citrine Wagtail	134	Asian Brown Flycatcher
69	Common Hawk Cuckoo	102	Grey Wagtail	135	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher
70	Asian Koel	103	Richard's Pipit	136	Asian Paradise-flycatcher
71	Greater Coucal	104	Paddyfield Pipit	137	White-throated Fantail
72	Indian Barn Owl	105	Tree Pipit	138	White-browed Fantail
73	Eurasian Eagle Owl	106	Large Cuckooshrike	139	Great Tit
74	Spotted Owlet	107	Common Woodshrike	140	Thick-billed Flowerpecker
75	Indian Nightjar	108	Red-vented Bulbul	141	Purple-rumped Sunbird
76	House Swift	109	Common lora	142	Purple Sunbird
77	Small Blue Kingfisher	110	Bay-backed Shrike	143	Oriental White-eye
78	White-breasted Kingfisher	111	Rufous-backed Shrike	144	Indian Silverbill
79	Pied Kingfisher	112	Southern Grey Shrike	145	Scaly-breasted Munia
80	Green Bee-eater	113	Blue Rock Thrush	146	House Sparrow
81	Indian Roller	114	Oriental Magpie Robin	147	Chestnut-shouldered Petronia
82	Common Hoopoe	115	Indian Robin	148	Baya Weaver
83	Indian Grey Hornbill	116	Black Redstart	149	Brahminy Starling
84	Brown-headed Barbet	117	Pied Bushchat	150	Rosy Starling
85	Crimson-throated Barbet	118	Indian Chat	151	Common Myna
86	Coppersmith Barbet	119	Indian Scimitar Babbler	152	Eurasian Golden Oriole
87	Yellow-crowned Woodpecker	120	Yellow-eyed Babbler	153	Black Drongo
88	Black-rumped Flameback	121	Common Babbler	154	Ashy Drongo
89	Ashy-Crowned Sparrow Lark	122	Large Grey Babbler	155	White-bellied Drongo
90	Rufous-tailed Lark	123	Jungle Babbler	156	Indian Treepie
91	Greater Short-toed Lark	124	Zitting Cisticola	157	House Crow
92	Crested Lark	125	Ashy Prinia	158	Large-billed Crow
93	Sykes's Crested Lark	126	Plain Prinia		

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Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

(By Sam Gross on Instagram, September 2019)

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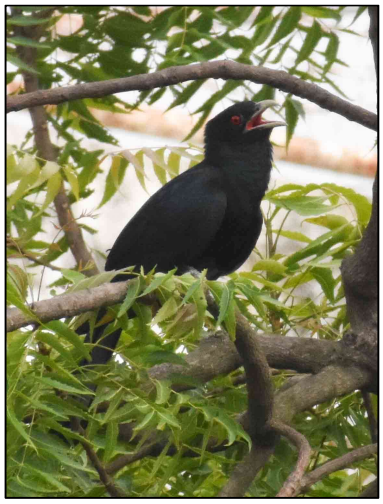
COVID-19: BOON OR BANE?
Report: Birding from a Human Zoo, March-May 2020

Text and Photos: Dr Barnali Chaudhuri

Purple Sunbird (male)

It is astonishing that a microscopic non-living particle has the capability to force a lockdown on a global scale, effectively halting the world economy. Maybe, this is nature's revenge. We destroy forests every day to erect concrete jungles, causing irreversible damage to our world. Nature's revenge has rendered us prisoners in our own home. For decades, we have imprisoned animals in enclosures for our entertainment. Today, we are the ones imprisoned, and possibly our absence from the streets has invited different fauna to come out and watch us, much like they would have in a human zoo. Ironically, this makes for some great birding opportunities for us puny humans.



Asian Koel (male)

It has been calm and quiet outside in the absence of air and noise pollution – I can hear the birds sing louder with every passing day, and even a few dogs bark in the middle of the day. While we sit inside our homes, the animal kingdom takes a further step towards reclaiming what was originally theirs. Asian Koels seem to be competing about whose cooing will win this year's Koel Idol – and they also allow us spectators a repeat performance around midnight for a couple of minutes. Alarms have lost all value now since I am woken up every day by the cacophony caused by the birds' singing in the '*bramhomuhurta*' (around 3:30 to 4:00AM).

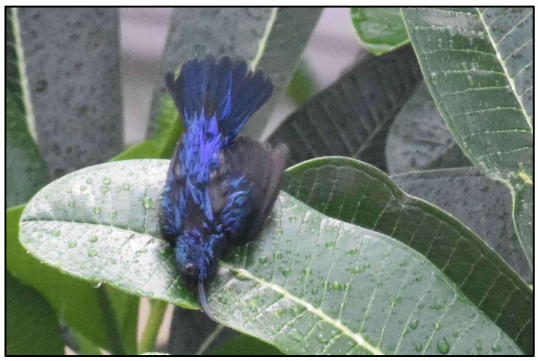
Asian Koel (female)

Tree full of mangoes

I reside on the 2rd floor of a corner house at Salt Lake, Kolkata. I am lucky that my house has three balconies, one of them being an open terrace which looks directly over a giant mango tree. It is currently blessed with enough mangoes to feed a village. The tree is so close to the balcony that I can touch and feel these mangoes. I have come to realize that much like humans, birds love mango trees as well. A Common Tailorbird calls from that tree very loudly every day – it is hard to believe that such a small bird can call that loudly.

While it has been a lonely storm for many of us during this lockdown, there have been actual heavy thunderstorms here in West Bengal. The sky rages with dark clouds, followed by the release of heavy rains. The clear skies that follow after are always reassuring – as though to say that indeed, this too shall pass. The trees always look happy to be drenched in rainwater. One such evening, as I enjoyed the aftermath of rain from my eastern balcony, I observed something rather peculiar. I noticed that a Tailorbird was bathing in the rainwater remaining collected on the mango leaves. It was a truly spectacular sight to see it enjoy its bath in nature's bathtub. It was rolling from one leaf to another, carefully scrubbing its feathers in the available rainwater.

Common Tailorbird bathing in water drops remaining on leaves

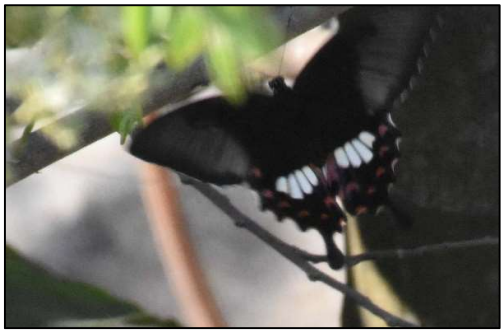


Purple Sunbird bathing

A few days later, I saw a Purple Sunbird do the same thing. It claimed its turn to bathe in the same mango leaves. Once it realized that it was too big for the rather narrow mango leaves, it flew across the road to a *Kathgolap* or White Plumeria (*Plumeria alba*) tree, since that tree has larger leaves. It has been a delightful revelation to observe these tiny intriguing behaviours.

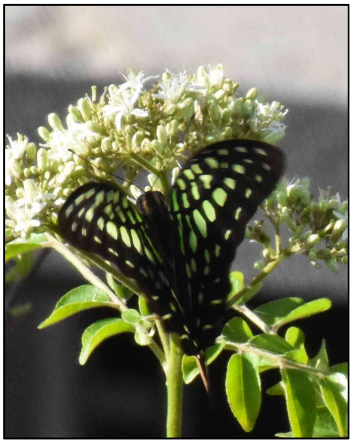
***Kathgolap* (White Plumeria)**

It is a myth that birds don't fly in stormy weather. I have observed many peculiar activities from my *verandah* during these pre-monsoon rains. While there are fewer birds flying in the sky during the showers, the ones that choose to do so fly at slower speeds and usually halt on treetops, using these as rest stops before embarking on their connecting flights. I have also seen a Red-vented Bulbul hop upwards from branch to branch until it reached the treetop repeatedly, only to come back and perch on the original starting point. The only explanation that I can think of, is that the Bulbul was enjoying a shower.



Common Mormon

Common Jay



Tailed Jay

Birds haven't been the only guests outside my windows. The Common Mormon, Common Jay and Tailed Jay butterflies, and some honeybees, have made regular appearances as well. The butterflies usually enjoy nectar from the flowers of a Curry Leaf tree. Around 4:00PM every day, right after the scorching heat of the sun subsides to reveal the beginnings of the evening, hundreds of dragonflies take to the skies to mark the end of the afternoon. Green and yellow Dragonflies seem to love certain spots on the mango tree, hopping from one twig to the other.

Granite Ghost

Wandering Glider

Green Marshhawk (aka Slender Skimmer)

We have also had a few intruders. The Tiger Moth, a fake wasp species of moth that mimics the real wasp, has zoomed through our house a few times.

Tiger Moth

Mud Dauber with prey

To contrast that, a Mud Dauber actually built a nest in my husband's backpack! The backpack has been untouched since the beginning of lockdown, and obviously the wasp thought the backpack was a stationary object that provides a perfect real estate opportunity for a nest. It put live green caterpillars inside it.

***Krishnachura* in full bloom**

From the north side of my balcony, I can see the striking red flowers of the *Krishnachura (Delonix regia)* tree, also known as Royal Poinciana, Flamboyant or Flame of the Forest. A Purple Sunbird pair usually hangs out on this tree. They whistle and fly from one branch to another, often resting on a cable wire. Interestingly, one day I caught sight of the Sunbird's tongue which was hanging from its beak. This was the first time I had noticed it from a very short distance.

Red-vented Bulbul

Oriental Magpie Robin

Asian Pied Starling

The nearby Eucalyptus tree hosts a musical chair competition everyday – bird entry only. The Red-vented Bulbul (the *bengalensis* sub-species, with the brown ear patch), House Crow, Oriental Magpie Robin, White-breasted Kingfisher, Asian Pied Starling etc. fight for the first place. The Eucalyptus does not discriminate – all species are welcome to roost in it, provided you get there early enough. Moreover, trees are not the only sought-after roosting spot for birds. I have found that Black Kites love to perch on the top of mobile towers after their morning sky surveillances.

The Yellow Gulmohar (*Peltophorum pterocarpum*) tree, slightly far away east of my terrace, is currently in full bloom with beautiful yellow flowers. A few Rose-ringed Parakeets roost in that tree every day. They come there every morning, and fly off towards the west every evening. I don't know where they come from, or where they go, but oftentimes (as in life), it is the journey that matters.

Black-hooded Oriole with prey

Our guest of honour, though, was a Black-hooded Oriole. It sat on the drumstick tree barely 20ft away from my east side balcony. It was on the prowl – it detected its prey within a minute into the hunt – a sorry caterpillar. The Oriole picked it up by its beak and smashed it several times against the tree trunk. Before I knew it, it had swallowed it whole – amazing! This was my husband's favourite birding moment during this lockdown. A few days ago, a White-throated Kingfisher with its two chicks landed on the same drumstick tree. The mother bird had caught a big cockroach and smashed it against the trunk. Shen then carefully divided it into equal halves and fed it to the chicks. Comparing the chicks to their mother, the juveniles have dark beaks and feet whereas the adult has a red beak and feet. Either way, though, I can feast my eyes on these spectacular and vividly coloured birds.

White-throated Kingfisher juvenile (L) and adult (R)

Coppersmith Barbet

A close second was finding the Coppersmith Barbet, a bird that was initially introduced to me during our trip to Himachal Pradesh. I recognized its call but was unable to spot the magnificent bird for quite some time. My search efforts finally paid off when I found the beauty sitting on a neem tree.

House Sparrow

Thanks to this lockdown and reduced human activity, birds that were once a common sight on the streets of Kolkata, but had gone missing in recent years, have once again resurfaced in urban areas of this giant metropolis. I have seen Sparrows practicing their high jump capabilities at a nearby house window. I think they were trying to find and eat insects through this exercise. The Magpie Robin sings its sweet call every day. The Rufous Treepie is back with its shrill call, which probably agitates all the Jungle Babblers who constantly quarrel with each other. I've also heard the trilling call of the Black-rumped Flameback. I have been trying to spot it for a while now, but in vain so far.

Rufous Treepie

Jungle Babbler

I have been observing a pair of Crows since the beginning of the lockdown. They assembled a nest in the jackfruit tree in front of my eastern veranda. It was eye-opening to observe how the two birds built their nest in a span of mere three days. One of them sat in the nest, functioning as the center for the other bird to build around it, giving the nest its trademark round bowl-like shape and perfect dimensions. It refused to leave its nest even under heavy rains. For two full days, I did not see it abandon the nest even for a single second. On the third day, it left to sit on a different branch of the same tree. The other Crow was feeding it there. After eating, it returned to the nest. The next day, it flew from the jackfruit tree to the drumstick tree where they repeated the feeding ritual. When it returned to its nest a few hours later, it was startled by the presence of a betel nut bark in its nest, and began calling in exasperation. The other one came to its rescue in no time but both of them flew away together. The Crow came back to inspect the nest the following day. It tried to fit inside but could not. It started calling again, and the other one came and tried its hand at fixing it. However, it could not do so, and the Crows flew away. A few days later, a Cuckoo came to investigate the abandoned nest, only to be fiercely shooed away by the protective creators. Nevertheless, now their architectural masterpiece sits on the jackfruit tree much like a haunted nest.

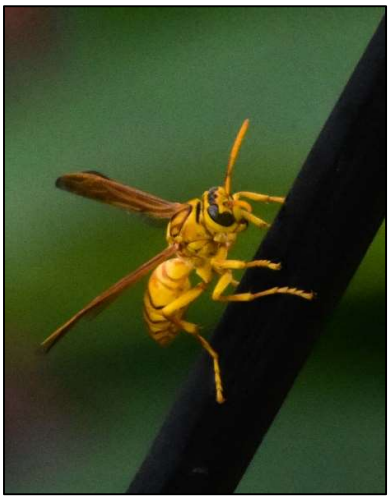
This lockdown has been an illuminating experience. I have travelled far and wide to look at birds through the lens of my binoculars/camera. When we venture into forests to feel closer to Mother Nature, we still experience these lovely birds from a fair distance. This experience has taught me how to be effectively birding from the comfort of my home. I have been blessed with the opportunity to experience a few of nature's most spectacular creations from a very close distance, enjoying their vivid colours and learning about their behavioural eccentricities. This has been a much-needed silver lining to my weeks in captivity.

Thus, I say – while the world grapples with the horrors of the Covid-19 bane, the animal kingdom rejoices in the boon of the absence of human presence. So, is it a boon or a bane?

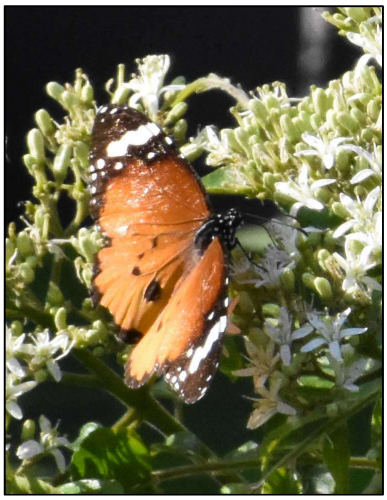
Acknowledgement: I would like to thank my daughter Anwesha Chaudhuri for her inputs on this article. She has embellished my content with her keen sense of language.

Some other photos taken during this period:

Purple Sunbird (female)



Yellow Paper Wasp



Plain Tiger

Rose-ringed Parakeet

Black-crowned Night Heron

House Crow feeding young with watermelon

Spotted Dove

Betel Nut flower

Red Kathgolap (Red Plumeria)

Colourful clouds in the morning

The sunset sky

Common Myna

Coconut flower

Common Baron

European (aka Western) Honey Bee

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Pied Crested Cuckoo: The Monsoon Bird… Or Not!

Text and Photo: Humayun Taher

Pied Crested Cuckoo

It started as a brief message on the Deccan Birders WhatsApp group. Since lockdown began most birding has been on mobile phone apps and social media. Someone mentioned that the IMD has predicted the arrival of the monsoons on the coast of Kerala on June 5 this year. The time had come to update my "Pied Crested Cuckoo calendar" for the year. And I came up with my first snag right away.

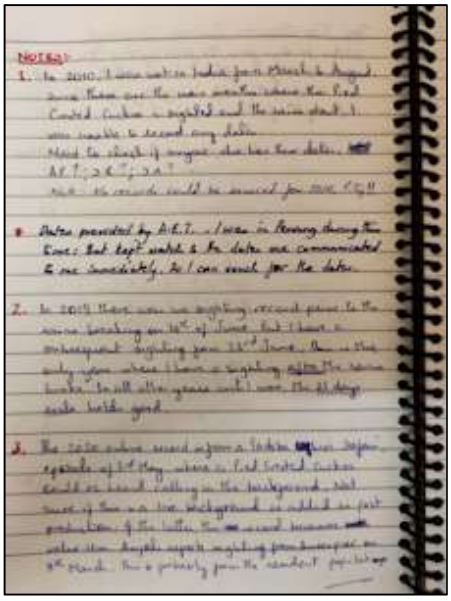
Perhaps I should explain. Since 2003, I have been sedulously maintaining, what I call my "*Pied Crested Cuckoo rain calculator*". It's nothing very fancy – just a simple table of dates. Here it is…

Year	Date sighted	First rain date	Rain in (No. of days)
2003	28-May	10-Jun	**13**
2004	01-Jun	11-Jun	**10**
2005	20-May	09-Jun	**20**
2006	02-Jun	10-Jun	**8**
2007	30-May	15-Jun	**16**
2008	25-May	09-Jun	**15**
2009	29-May	12-Jun	**14**
2010	Was not in India from March to August.		
2011	30-May	16-Jun	**17**
2012	19-May	09-Jun	**21**
2013	18-May	29-May	**11**
2014	01-Jun	21-Jun	**20**
2015	30-May	09-Jun	**10**
2016	01-Jun	20-Jun	**19**
2017	27-May	11-Jun	**15**
2018	04-Jun	18-Jun	**14**
2019	23-Jun	14-Jun	**-9**
2020	3-May (Online record)		

The species is known to move across the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean to reach India in May or June; sightings from Oman, Saudi Arabia and the Seychelles have been reported during the migratory season. Some believe that the bird uses the monsoon winds to assist its flight during this migration.

But why all this recording of dates? Is there a relationship here?

The claim to fame here is that *within 21 days of the first sighting* of this species, the monsoon is supposed to break. There seems to be a strong association between this bird and rain. In part, this could be because this species migrates to large areas across northern India around the monsoon, and has often been called the 'harbinger of rain'.



Some of the notes

In the early days of the BSAP, when we learnt this important fact, I remember how eagerly we used to look forward to that first sighting. As the first week of June approached, the anticipation became almost painful: every field trip we made during those days was given over, almost exclusively, to the search for black-and-white feathers. And when we did happen to see it, there were exclamations and back-slapping and hand-shaking and smiles all around and summer was 'officially' considered to have ended!

In recent times, we have become aware that there is a small 'resident' population of these birds in Southern India. Given this fact, it does seem a bit far-fetched to assume that the resident population goes into hiding during the summer and only emerges a few days before the rains. There are indeed two separate Pied Crested Cuckoo populations in the sub-continent and that is one of the reasons that the scientists are not certain about the reliability of the bird as a rain indicator species. But I still think that the coincidence is a remarkable one. And while it is true that we occasionally get an odd sighting of this species during the summers, the bulk of the sightings do come in just before the monsoons – which seems to suggest that the birds we get here are mainly from the African population.

This year, not having gone birding since early March, I am not sure of the date I have inserted in the table above. The 2020 record is from a Tadoba Live Safari episode of 3rd May, where a Pied Crested Cuckoo could be heard calling in the background. I am not sure if this is an actual call in the background or added during post-production; if the latter, the record becomes valueless. But I am using it as a working hypothesis.

Coming back to the table, the 21-day interval seems to hold remarkably well. There is only one instance of the sighting being **after** the rains, and that was in 2019. This in part could be because I was a little busy that year and hadn't been birding during that critical time between May and June, when the bulk of the sightings of the species usually occur.

But this one exception notwithstanding, the relationship between the sighting of the Pied Crested Cuckoo and the coming of the rains seems remarkably consistent. And until science can provide a more detailed explanation, I am going to continue to cling fondly to my own pet theory. If for no other reason than that I **want** the monsoon to arrive at the time the Cuckoo says it will!

Pied Crested Cuckoo

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photo: Umesh Mani

Sanderling (*Calidris elba*)

Sanderling

Sanderling flock foraging

(Pulicat, December 30, 2018)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Scolopacidae
Genus: *Calidris*
Species: *C. elba*
Size: 18-20 cm

Description & distribution: The Sanderling is a small, sprightly wader, with the name being derived from the Old English *sand-yrðling* (sand-ploughman). The scientific name is rather evocative of the overall whitish appearance of the bird: the genus name *Calidris* is derived from the Ancient Greek *Kalidris* or *Skalidris*, a term Aristotle used to describe grey water-side birds, and the species name *alba* is Latin for 'white'. It is a small, plump wader, and has a somewhat chunkier and rounder appearance than the Sandpipers; the bill also looks stouter and the head looks larger. The wintering (non-breeding) bird seen in India is very pale – it has white underparts and greyish upperparts, with a broad white wing-stripe, seen conspicuously in flight, bordered by a small dark shoulder patch – and in general, looks much paler than other similar-sized shorebirds. The bill and legs are black. During the breeding season, it develops rusty or brick red mottling on face, throat and breast; the sides, however, remain unmarked. Juveniles are more starkly coloured than the adults, and are boldly spangled black-and-white above.

The Sanderling is a circumpolar breeder, breeding in the High Arctic areas of North America, Europe and Asia, and is a long-distance winter migrant, wintering in the coastal areas almost across the world – South America, Southern Europe, Africa, Asia (India and Sri Lanka) and Australia. Migration may involve a journey of anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000km.

Habitat & behaviour: The Sanderling is usually seen in small to large flocks on coastal mudflats, beaches, estuaries and large lakes. Flocks are usually seen scurrying back and forth as though 'chasing' the waves. Their diet primarily consists of invertebrate prey like sand crabs, which are usually buried a few centimetres beneath the sand – the only time the crabs come out is when the incoming wave brings in the plankton that they feed on, before rushing back into their burrows in the sand as the wave retreats. Since their bills can only penetrate 2-3cm into the sand, the Sanderlings try to catch the crabs just as, or immediately after, they go back into the burrows – hence the 'chasing' behavior. Besides crabs, they may also feed on amphipods, isopods, insects, marine worms, small mollusks and, occasionally, carrion. During breeding, they may also feed on flies and other insects, some seeds, algae and leaves. They can be territorial, with the males defending their territory. Pairs can be monogamous or polyandrous (one female and two males). Flight is free and rapid, and they readily take wing, in flocks, and usually staying low in the air. Besides a conversational chatter (like a soft, squeaky *wick wick*) when in flocks, the call is a sharp *kip*, and has been compared to frog calls or an unpleasant alarm clock. During breeding displays, consisting of alternate fluttering and gliding, males utter croaking, frog-like trills, and females signal their willingness to mate with low buzzing notes that can sound like a typewriter.

Nesting: The Sanderling breeds generally from late May to late July or early August, in its breeding range. The nest is a shallow scrape in open and barren ground, somewhat higher than the surroundings. The usual clutch consists of 3-4 eggs, olive green to pale brown, with sparse brown and black spotting.

Local name: The Sanderling is known as *'Moondru viral ullan'* or '*Manal ullan*' in Tamil, *'Thirakkada'* in Malayalam, *'Dariyayi khichdiyo'* in Gujarati.

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